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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000701

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S NATIONALIST MHP: GREY WOLF PACK SNAPS AT LONE WOLF LEADER BAHCELI

(U) Classified by PolCouns John Kunstadter; reasons: 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: MHP members at all levels blame party leader Bahceli for the party's poor performance in Nov. 3 elections. Meanwhile, Bahceli is reneging on his promise to step aside and is working to secure his grip on the party, but faces growing pressure from the MHP grassroots and "Grey Wolves" cadres. MHP currently is keeping its powder dry and staying silent in the face of AK's overwhelming electoral victory and high approval ratings, but could become more of a street-level factor amid growing public anxiety and potential street protests over Iraq. End summary.

The Bride Gimps Along

2. (C) Reeling from defeat in the Nov. 3 national elections, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) officials are searching for answers. Our MHP contacts -- both at the local and national levels -- blame the party's poor showing largely on idiosyncratic leader Devlet Bahceli and on Bahceli's hand-picked cronies in the MHP pack. Bahceli and company failed to deliver, they say, on MHP's campaign promises, including hanging convicted PKK leader Ocalan and solving the Islamic headscarf problem. Moreover, Bahceli's bungling of MHP's campaign list, which the MHP leader packed with names unpopular among the party's grassroots, underscored a growing division between the party elite yearning for mainstream acceptance and its more unrefined and hardcore base. MHP member Abdullah Helvacı, mayor of Kutludugun town outside of Ankara, told poloff Jan. 17 that Bahceli lacks the courage and strong personality to push MHP's agenda. Indulging in classic grim MHP rhetoric, Helvacı asserted that Bahceli had had his chance and blew it while in government: "While (then-sickly P.M.) Ecevit was wetting his pants, Bahceli still acted like his bride," Helvacı exclaimed.

3. (C) Bahceli announced just after the elections that he would not stand for party chairman at MHP's next convention. However, our contacts universally believe that he will try to hang on and suggest he is already hard at work.

-- Rıza Muftuoğlu, a Movement intellectual and head of MHP's Turkic States and Societies Association, explained to poloff Jan. 14 that Bahceli is planning a comeback. The MHP administration is still in Bahceli's hands, he said. Muftuoğlu noted that Bahceli's return will exacerbate existing tensions between the leadership group and the base; since the elections, the number of new party membership applications has dropped dramatically. Muftuoğlu asserted that if Bahceli does stay, he has no choice but to appease the party base by purging the party's higher ranks of yes-men.

-- Turgut Altınok, AK Party mayor of Ankara's conservative, nationalist Kecioren township (and a former MHPer), recently "guaranteed" to us that Bahceli will not step down, a move that he says will doom MHP in the next elections.

4. (C) Beyond its own internal fractures, MHP must wrestle with the threat of the populist (and anti-American) movement on the political right of media mogul and Motorola deadbeat Cem Uzan's Genc Parti and the emergence of former Interior Minister Mehmet Agar as leader of True Path Party (DYP). Muftuoğlu asserted that Genc's nationalist rhetoric had attracted some 3% of MHP's vote total -- enough to keep MHP out of Parliament. Furthermore, Muftuoğlu explained, with his deep pockets and multiple media outlets, Uzan will have little trouble keeping himself in the headlines. For his part, Agar is a figure with nationalist credentials and, according to Muftuoğlu, has a considerable base of support in rural Anatolia, where MHP -- especially at the local level -- has been strongest. According to Muftuoğlu, Agar will be a "serious threat" to MHP in the future.

What's next?

15. (C) Despite the competing currents at the higher levels of the organization, MHP is still a party of the streets. It is likely to rely on its hardcore nationalists to maintain MHP's contact with alienated and other disaffected voters. How loud they become will have direct influence on the outcome of the next MHP congress, expected to be held in October, according to our contacts. More important is the effect this internecine struggle may have on more immediate matters. As the GOT approaches decisions on Iraq and Cyprus, we need to watch MHP's rougher elements. With their deserved reputation for violence, these elements will seek to make their presence felt amid the general clamor of protest -- potentially making street demonstrations more problematic for the authorities.

PEARSON